

STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD

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**Before the Subcommittee on Housing and Community Opportunity
of the House Financial Services Committee**

October 11, 2007

Chairwoman Waters, Ranking Member Capito, and distinguished members of the Committee:

The Committee is to be commended for taking up the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act, on this the 20th year since its passage. Important lessons have been learned since then, including the importance of permanent housing and intergovernmental collaborations in achieving positive results. The reauthorization creates an opportunity to codify those gains in law. In my remarks, I shall address a number of the issues confronting the committee, including expansions in the definition of homelessness, the need for prevention programs, the value of the permanent housing set-aside, the importance of local and state 10-year planning efforts, and the role of data and research in shaping an effective national response to this problem.

In so doing, two cross-cutting themes emerge which I hope the committee will keep in mind throughout its deliberations, and which highlight perhaps the most important principles embodied by this legislation. First, the McKinney-Vento Act provides for critical federal leadership on this important social problem through both the US Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Department of Housing and Urban Development by setting policy priorities for the country and by establishing standardized national frameworks for public accountability. Second, the federal resources provided through the McKinney-Vento Act can and should be used to leverage “mainstream” social welfare system resources from federal, state and local agencies, and to assure that those public systems are being held accountable for the homelessness of the populations they are serving, or, as the case may be, not serving adequately.

Together, these themes speak to the importance of the McKinney-Vento Act in protecting our most vulnerable neighbors from being abandoned by responsible public authorities, and from being left to fend for survival amidst a wholly inadequate patchwork of dedicated, but fundamentally limited, private charities.

Current Federal Definitions of Homelessness Are Appropriate to Agency Missions

The Committee should resist efforts to expand the HUD definition of homelessness. Federal definitions of homelessness do vary, particularly between the Department of Education, HHS and HUD, but that is because Education, HHS and HUD have fundamentally different mandates. DOE has to assure that children have access to mainstream educational systems, including transportation to school, despite temporary displacement or homelessness. HHS has to assure access to mainstream healthcare resources for families and individuals in need, whether they are homeless or not. Consequently, the DOE and HHS definitions of homelessness include people who are temporarily displaced, though not experiencing literal homelessness, to assure their access to mainstream resources. HUD, on the other hand, has responsibility for designating eligibility and priorities for the targeting of emergency housing resources, which are not otherwise available to people in conventional housing. This is appropriately limited to people experiencing literal homelessness, as these are the persons who – but for the shelter system itself – are literally without shelter at all.

Designating people in housing as eligible for HUD's homeless programs also potentially expands the number of people qualifying for these very limited resources significantly, without any required proportionate increase in those resources. This will effectively dilute the potential impact of the McKinney Vento programs and the ability of those programs to have measurable impacts on literal homelessness. As a further caution, it should be noted that any attempts to expand the boundaries of homelessness to people in conventional housing is fraught with other consequences that could not be easily addressed at the policy and program levels, including establishing verifiable eligibility criteria, and basic program monitoring and outcomes. Given the relative invisibility of people in conventional housing, verifying eligibility based on private housing movement patterns, as proposed in Senate Bill 1518, would be practically impossible, as would assessing the impact of McKinney-Vento funding on measuring housing outcomes.

The Value of Prevention

One underlying purpose of definitional expansions of homelessness is to legitimize the needs of the “near-homeless,” and the potential role of prevention programs in reducing homelessness. Evaluation research has not yet found that broadly available community-based prevention programs have a net impact on literal homelessness. Future prevention initiatives will therefore need to be informed by further testing and research. While the McKinney-Vento Act appropriation is not sufficient to support broad-based homelessness prevention efforts, the Act could authorize demonstration activities that would engage mainstream social welfare systems in addressing the emergency housing needs of populations they serve.

- ❖ Federal McKinney-Vento Act resources could be especially useful if they were to leverage matching funds from state and local government agencies to avert imminent homeless spells or to avert shelter stays of an unnecessarily long duration. For example, demonstration funds could be

made available to test models of rapid rehousing strategies for families, or to test other shelter diversion program models. Engagement of state TANF and child welfare agencies in these demonstrations could help to establish how those agencies' resources could be used to support emergency assistance and relocation programs that help families avert shelter stays or avoid long shelter stays.

- ❖ Among vulnerable adults exiting institutional care, such as substance abuse detoxification programs, psychiatric inpatient care, or correctional facilities, demonstration programs could also be piloted that establish population-targeted, time-limited and outcome-oriented transitional residential programs ("step-down" care), funded on a matching basis by the mainstream social welfare systems from which these clients come. Some conversion of emergency shelter facilities for this purpose could also be considered, by supporting specialization in the target populations served and extending traditional nighttime-only shelter programs into 24-hour programs that have a population- and outcome-oriented mission.

Federal leadership through the McKinney-Vento Act could thus help to seed homelessness prevention as a legitimate mainstream service function, targeted at the imminently or recently homeless, and to establish a regime of accountability focused on housing stability and reduced homelessness spells.

Meeting the Challenge of Family Homelessness

Consistent with the prevention-oriented goals described above, I would also urge the Committee to consider the establishment of housing stability and reduced periods of homelessness as the primary objectives of the McKinney-Vento homeless assistance program funds for families. For example, the Committee could establish as a guiding principal, and ultimately an outcome measure, that no family should be homeless for more than 30 or 60 days.

Research has provided ample evidence that homelessness is harmful to children and families. Federal policy and resources should therefore be used to assure that state and local programs are working to assure that families and children are homeless for as brief periods as possible, and do not promote unnecessarily long shelter stays. Recent research by my colleagues and me shows that most families with very long shelter stays do not have more substantial barriers to housing stability as compared to families with short shelter stays, suggesting that policies and programs rather than families' characteristics contribute significantly to long shelter stays. Further, this research shows that long shelter stays are very costly, with a typical episode of a year to fourteen months equal in cost to four of five years of a federal housing subsidy. Given the evidence of the negative impact of homelessness on child health, school outcomes, and family functioning, and given the high cost of long-term shelter, federal resources should be used to assure that families are rehoused as quickly as possible, with appropriate support by mainstream TANF and child welfare agencies, health and mental health services, and

employment and child care agencies. At the very least, federal policy should not promote unnecessarily long shelter stays. As some homeless families (25% by our conservative estimate) will have substantial barriers to self-sufficiency, state and federal housing subsidy programs, such as Section 8, must expand to meet this need.

The McKinney-Vento Act can't solve the housing affordability problem, and it can't solve the shortage of available units in some jurisdictions. But the McKinney-Vento Act can and should be used to leverage mainstream social welfare systems in implementing rapid-rehousing strategies, with appropriate supports, and in establishing a firm national accountability standard that no child should be homeless for more than 30 or 60 days.

The Permanent Housing Set-Aside

As with families, federal policy through the McKinney-Vento Act should also promote a primary outcome of housing stability for adults who are unaccompanied by children, otherwise known as “single adults.” Perhaps the most important improvement in federal homelessness policy over the last decade has been the permanent housing “set-aside” within the McKinney-Vento Act, and its use to advance efforts to end chronic homelessness among single adults with disabilities. Research on the dynamics of homelessness among single adults has consistently shown that people experiencing chronic homelessness are costly users of emergency shelters, and acute care systems in health, public safety, and corrections. While adults who become chronically homeless may represent only 15% of adult shelter users over time, research indicates that they occupy more than half of the emergency shelter beds for adults in our cities, and account for a substantial majority of the people who live – and in some cases die – on our streets and in other public spaces. Research has further shown that investments in supportive housing targeted to this population can be partially or wholly offset by the reduced use of shelters, hospitals, emergency rooms, and jails.

In the face of such evidence, it is difficult to justify policies that commit resources to essentially maintaining people in a state of homelessness, when those same resources could be leveraged for a solution to their plight. The current policy of setting aside 30% of the McKinney-Vento resources for permanent housing programs for people who are chronically homeless makes moral and economic sense in light of these data, and the Committee should codify this policy into law.

Jurisdictional Partnerships Foster Results

The role that the federal government has played in promoting efforts to address chronic homelessness offers a model that the Committee should consider as it develops legislation to reauthorize the McKinney-Vento Act. Federal leadership, as exemplified by the efforts of the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness working with governors, mayors and county executives, has been responsible for more than 300 localities and their states in developing “10-year plans” to end homelessness, including chronic homelessness. While quite variable in their scope and detail, these planning

efforts have been responsible for the leveraging of significant new state and local government resources, as well as private contributions, to the cause of ending homelessness and chronic homelessness. The McKinney-Vento Act resources alone are insufficient to address the problem of chronic homelessness, and state and local partners will be required as active partners for progress to be made.

Critical to these planning efforts has been the use of data and research to inform local strategies. In a recent federally funded review of this literature, my colleagues and I observed that more than 40 studies of “high cost” service users have been conducted in support of these local plans. Documenting the impact of chronic homelessness on local hospitals, emergency services, and correctional programs, has had a galvanizing and motivating impact on local and state leaders, and the agencies whose programs are so negatively impacted by homelessness.

In this way, the “chronic homelessness initiative” of the federal government, both through the organizing and leadership of the US Interagency Council on Homelessness, through HUDs use of the McKinney-Vento Act program competition, and through innovation developed in partnership with the field, has provided an exemplary use of federal policy for leadership purposes – in setting national priorities, and in the leveraging of federal resources for more state and local commitments.

Federal Data Collection Efforts Promote Accountability

The other exemplar from the last ten years that deserves preservation in the reauthorized McKinney-Vento Act is the standardized data collection and reporting that HUD has adopted at Congress’s request. Known as the Homeless Services Management Information System (HMIS) initiative, this activity has engaged hundreds of jurisdictions in systematic data collection. Such data has enabled local and state governments, and indeed the federal government, to measure the prevalence and dynamics of homelessness, and progress in our efforts to reduce it. Recent accomplishments stemming from this initiative include the first Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to the Congress, submitted last year; the “high user” cost studies described above; as well as recent enumerations that have demonstrated the success of the chronic homelessness initiative in reducing chronic homelessness. Local reports from more than two dozen communities have documented declines in chronic or street homelessness over the last several years.

Such evidence is crucial to future efforts to extend these commitments, and to garner further resources to build upon these successes. Once again, federal leadership has played the critical role in this area, providing funding for the HMIS activities, and by setting clear national standards for data collection and reporting that can guide future local, state and federal policymaking.

Local Governance Should Reflect Public Sector Authority

Finally, in conclusion, I want to amplify my support for the partnership and collaborative model that has become federal policy in this area, primarily through the

support of the McKinney-Vento Act. As is well known, federal resources as currently configured cannot adequately address the homelessness problem. Other federal programs, as well as state and local governments will be required to partner with communities to address homelessness over the long term. Federal policy should not back away from this partnership approach, as it has been critical to getting mayors, county executives and state governments into this arena. The federally funded safety net programs that should better serve homeless people -- and prevent their homelessness -- are in many cases administered by state and local governments. These entities must be involved in addressing the homelessness problem if we are to succeed, and federal resources should seek to leverage their participation through matching programs and other incentives and mandates. The US Interagency Council on Homelessness has accomplished a great deal in engaging these entities in 10-year planning efforts, and federal policy should continue to support these gains by codifying into law the policy tools that can continue to leverage the participation of state and local leadership. Federal policy should thus give substantial consideration to the primacy of the role and resources of state and local governments in designing the governance structure of how McKinney-Vento resources will be spent in the future.

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak before you today. I look forward to answering any questions you may have regarding my testimony.